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Prophets of Doom Don't Help Population Problem

"OVERPOPULATION is the main problem. Scientists fear that if people, like rats, live too close together, they will destroy each other," was a Palo Alto fifth-grader's response to a questionnaire on environment as inserted in the Congressional Record by Rep. George E. Brown (D-Calif.).

This is an admirable example of the awareness of one of today's schoolgirls. Grayer heads have voiced the same threat of doom: that we will destroy ourselves like the lemmings even if we find technical and political solutions to the hazards of war, famine and pollution.

The argument is often self-contradictory. On the one hand, we are in a bad fix about population because we have lost, in the course of evolution, the behavioral regulators that keep some animal species from overgrowing their habitat. On the other hand, our collective psyche is supposedly still shadowed by an urge to self-destruction that will become irresistible when our population exceeds a certain density.

SCIENTISTS are indeed making some extraordinarily interesting discoveries about the effects of crowding on reproductive failure and on fighting in animal communities. The results vary a great deal among different species and circumstances. One important generalization is that the intro-

duction of a strange male into a group is likely to be more stressful than crowding itself.

Some popularizers have insisted that crowding leads directly to crime and other social pathology as an inevitable consequence of man's animal heritage. Scientists working in the laboratory and involved in objective psychological testing are much more critical and cautious.

The noted anthropologist Edward T. Hall has been one of the most avid students of "proxemics," the science of man's use of space. In "The Hidden Dimension," he writes: "The animal studies also teach us that crowding per se is neither good nor bad, but rather that overstimulation and disruptions of social relationships as a consequence of overlapping personal distances lead to population collapse."

He then goes on to discuss methods of environmental management, through architecture and urban planning, that can minimize the stress on the human organism that may be a by-product of crowding.

THE ORGANIZATION of our communities then faces us as the essential issue for our survival as a species. Planning new cities, and the rebuilding of our old ones, are inelegant challenges. They involve complicated and intellectually unrewarding arrangements of people and resources.

The academic mind is not the best adapted for these tasks, but it may still unearth a great deal about the biology and psychology

of living together that is profoundly relevant. Airy speculations about the biological inevitability of doom are not only bad science, but serious impediments to solving some of our most urgent problems.

One of the most immoral suggestions now adrift on our campuses is that we must pull back on our economic growth. Obviously, we are a badly misdeveloped country, but a redirection, not a regression, is what we need. The reconstruction of our cities is a task which can properly consume any conceivable surplus that our industrial economy can generate.

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